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LARUELLE AND DELEUZE: FROM DIFFERENCE TO MULTIPLICITY

LEXICON, PHILOFICTION DELEUZE, DIFFERENCE, MULTIPLICITY, NON-LARUELLE, NON-PHILOSOPHY, QUEER

CONTEXT

We are living through a very interesting period in the realm of Continental Philosophy, containing aspects of continuing progress and of intellectual regression. The regression proclaims itself to be a decisive progress beyond the merely negative and critical philosophies of the recent past. Yet the philosophies of Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard cannot be summed up in the image of pure critique. Their critical dissolution of the dogmatic residues contained in even the most innovative philosophies they had encountered did not leave us in a powerless void of negativity and paralysis. Beyond the critique of the new figures of transcendence and ontotheology they gave concrete sketches of how to see the world in terms of a very different sort of ontology based on immanence – a diachronic ontology. This diachronic ontology is pursued today by such diverse figures as Bernard Stiegler, Bruno Latour, and François Laruelle.

The recent promotion of philosophical successors to this constellation of thinkers of immanence, such as Badiou and Zizek, has not led to any real progress but to a labour of travesty of the past (one has only to look at Badiou's *DELEUZE and Zizek's ORGANS WITHOUT BODIES*) and to a return to such intellectual deadends as Lacanian psychoanalysis. But even these contemporary regressive philosophers remain in dialogue, however one-sided and unjust, with their illustrious predecessors, and strive to confront them at the level of conceptual richness that characterised their work. The next step in the regression was to keep up the general aura of having "gone beyond" the older supposedly negative thinkers but to radically simplify the conceptual level, presenting easy summary presentations of the new thought while conveniently forgetting the conceptual paths followed. This has been the principle contribution of Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology and of the related movement of Speculative Realism.

Both Mehdi Belhaj Kacem and Alexander Galloway agree that it is Badiou's philosophy that expresses in its purest and most general form the new paradigm that articulates explicitly what is elsewhere just blithely presupposed as a form of thought too evident to even be aware of. They indicate that the next step in consolidating the regression that Badiou's philosophy, however innovative, does not initiate but rather registers and legitimates, corresponds to the far less ambitious productions of the object-oriented ontologists. I say far less "ambitious" in the sense of conceptual ambition, because their ambition is of a different order. They are the marketised version of the Badiou-Zizek constellation, and so the extremely politicised tone of the Continentals has

been discreetly dissolved to leave a more demagogic packaging for the stale ideas that Harman's OOO trumpets ambitiously as the new construction required after so much critique. OOO/SR promulgates a dumbed down de-marxised version of the set-theoretic universe explicated by Badiou.

It is normal that in this context François Laruelle's philosophy is at last coming into its own. It could not fully succeed while the work of Deleuze and Derrida were in progress, as his critiques of that work were only half-true, based on giving it an ultimately uncharitable reading as remaining within the norms of sufficient philosophy, but other readings are possible. Laruelle pursued over the decades his unwavering commitment to immanence, and this project shines forth now against the background of the regression that Badiou-Zizek-Meillassoux and the OOOxians represent. In all my commentaries on Laruelle's non-standard philosophy I do not critique or denigrate but only propose concepts to illuminate his path and to suggest ways out of the inevitable impasses it encounters on its way to immanence. Nor am I external to Laruelle's project (rather I am a fellow traveller on the path of pluralism). That's the whole point of discussing his work..

I do not scorn Laruelle's own conceptual creations when I say that sometimes they amount to impasses when viewed in the light of his later evolution. Creations can often lead to impasses that actively inspire new creations, there is no shame in that. Laruelle has never ceased advancing, nor have I. I thank Laruelle for his work, and read it with great passion.

I try to give a useful perspective on that work, to situate it within the context of French philosophy of the last 50 years. I am trying to articulate my own sense of recent philosophical history, as I am dis-satisfied by much that has been written about it (particularly by the object-oriented ontologists, the speculative realists, and the "new" realists). I feel that whatever the polemics I engage in, this is a positive task, and I am pursuing a useful objective in doing so. I write without the sanction of Laruelle or of the handful of Laruelle scholars and partisans who discuss his work in English. Nor have I had any meaningful dialogue with the small group of translators who are busy making his work available to the Anglophone world. This solitude is not necessarily a handicap, as I express a singular point of view, owing little or nothing to the currently recognised "authorities" on this subject. Laruelle is no one's property, or non-philosophy means nothing at all.

ON NON-LARUELLIAN NON-PHILOSOPHY

From a pluralist point of view, there is no intellectual center of the world, and so there are many important ways of philosophising. We can use this sort of decentred pluralism as a criterion for evaluating the worth of various philosophical positions. Badiou, for example, fails to convince us fully because despite his avowed theory of multiples his own practice is not always pluralist. A telling example is his relation to psychoanalysis and his inability to pluralise the unconscious. For Badiou Paris is the center, so Lacan is the center for the theory of the psyche. If he manages to "correct" Lacan a little, he has made, in his own eyes, a world-historical contribution. Using this decentred pluralism as a pragmatic criterion I think that Laruelle is far more satisfying intellectually than Badiou. His book on Badiou (ANTI-BADIOU) leaves no doubt about that. However the criterion of pluralism leads us to conclude that Laruelle's thought must be generalised and de-centered even further. One superiority of Laruelle's path of thought has been his capacity to criticise his own ideas and to progress beyond them.

Badiou has never truly criticised his lacanism and his maoism, and his "communist hypothesis" has just added epicycles on epicycles to an uninterrupted process of self-justification, where it should be obvious that some form of auto-critique is necessary. Badiou has never really broken with standard philosophy nor with scientism, maintaining the magisterial position in philosophy and regarding the "matheme" as the paradigm of knowledge. In contrast, Laruelle has analysed and critiqued his own former philosophism and scientism.

Laruelle has evolved over time, but coming as he does from the Ecole Normale Supérieure, like Badiou, he has taken a long time to free himself from the limitations of his formative context and intellectual epoch. Deleuze and Feyerabend have both declared that the academic philosopher is a "bureaucrat of thought" and Laruelle agrees. So he has had to fight hard against this bureaucratic side of his intellectual character. The non-philosopher is not a bureaucrat but a heretic and gnostic, i.e. he sees the shadow and the unconscious side in all things, including in himself. From this point of view Badiou represents a regression to an older model of the totalising philosopher, but Laruelle is trying to be something else.

There was a very interesting analysis of the notion of "critique" in France in the wake of May 1968. Creative philosophers like Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault analysed the critical position itself, revealing the limits of its negativity i.e. its founding itself on notions of lack and negation and againstness, and of its "derivativity" i.e. its basic dependence on the problematics of those it criticised. Marxist dialectics, Lacanian analysis, Althusserism, deconstruction, were found to be fundamentally flawed approaches. The alternative that emerged was in each case a pluralism (of intensities, language games, force relations, assemblages, epistemes, dispositifs, modes of existence, processes of subjectivation). There was no attempt to eliminate negativity and critique, (this would have been too evident a pragmatic contradiction in those long lost times before OOO replaced argument with impudent bluff and hypocritical denial of the obvious) but only to dissipate its primacy.

Laruelle went through a long phase of apparent "critique" in his Philosophy I phase, but only a naive reader blinded by Lacanism could fail to see the Nietzschean and Heideggerian positive terrain that underlies these investigations. Laruelle himself came to criticise this phase, not because of its supposed negativity, but because of its tendentious positivity. This positivity was still limited

to the confines of the denegation of immanence constitutive of philosophy. Laruelle came to call this conformist conception of positivity “sufficiency”, and began to think outside of its confines. Laruelle’s name, during the decade of his Philosophy II, for the non-philosophical positivity beyond critique was “science”. Later, he came to see that this primacy accorded to science was yet another ruse of philosophical sufficiency and he broke with what he himself calls his “scientism”. He now affirms that the non-philosophical pairing of philosophy and science is just one possible way of doing non-standard philosophy, and that other pairings, e.g. philosophy and religion, philosophy and photography, are equally possible.

A consequent philosophical pluralism has its own internal dynamic that leads from pluralism as a particular position inside philosophy (e.g. Paul Feyerabend’s methodological pluralism), to a pluralising of philosophy itself as an ontological realm and a cognitive régime laying claim to completeness and universality (e.g. Feyerabend’s evolution from Machian “way of research” to his later ontological pluralism. In both cases, the target of Feyerabend’s critiques is totalisation, the vision of “philosophy as a discourse that covers everything ... an all-encompassing synthetic view of the world and what it all means”). This is the source of the move of putting philosophy in relation to a non-philosophical outside (“non-philosophical” not meaning a negation of philosophy but a wider practice, as in non-Euclidean geometries).

Laruelle has written on this sort of non-philosophical move at length, but he cannot claim exclusive ownership (nor even chronological priority) of this idea, nor is he necessarily the best exemplar of the practice of such a non-philosophy. But at least his work is a gesture in the right direction, both explaining and exhibiting its necessity and desirability. Laruelle’s work is no exception and Laruelle can have the operator “non-” applied to himself with as much justice as he applies it to the domain of philosophy. A non-laruellian non-philosophy is a reasonable and desirable extension and revision of philosophical pluralism. Feyerabend and Deleuze are good examples of such a non-laruellian non-philosophy.

THE PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY

In his preface to THE PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY, published in French in 1981, situates his thought in relation to the philosophical context. He talks of working towards a possible encounter between pluralism, in danger of being conflated with relativism, and a thought of the Absolute, away from idealist entrapment in the relative and the constructed. Such an encounter would permit the extraction of a non-relativist “essence of Multiplicities”. The formula for this non-relativist pluralism is the reconciling of the “thought of the multiple and of becoming, of dispersion and of dissemination” at work in the “contemporary hopes of an overflowing of Greco-Occidental

Representation” with a “thought of the Absolute ... a thought of the One, but of the One without unity, beyond the Idea, the Logos, even of Being”. This project, while quite logical and necessary in its attempt at deepening and radicalising the poststructuralist ‘research-programmes of the 70s, may seem very abstract. Yet Laruelle insists that its “methods, goals, and results are only apparently merely theoretical”. Not only is it suffused by “diverse emotions” but

“It is itself from beginning to end an emotion, it is always born from an encounter, the encounter between a disappointment and an as yet unknown demand that the emotion envelops as a certainty higher than itself, sustaining and maintaining it” (7).

This disappointment is one of the strongest driving forces in non-philosophy, but it is bearable and fruitful only by “letting oneself be convinced by the Absolute, by allowing oneself to be seized and enchanted, by not resisting the non-power of this emotion”. (Note: all translations from LE PRINCIPE DE MINORITÉ are my own).

Laruelle’s THE PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY is the first book in his Philosophy II phase. It expresses a disappointment in the philosophies of difference and Laruelle’s enchantment by “the Absolute as such”. This disappointment led him to

renounce once and for all ... the contemporary problematic of Difference, i.e. of relative and continuous multiplicities that it still inscribes in the hypostasis of Being, or of minoroties that it still implants on the body of the State (7).

This renunciation implied the sacrifice of those figures that had guided not just the work and the hopes of his predecessors and contemporaries, but his own philosophical research as well:

It then became necessary to sacrifice the tutelary genii, Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, [who were] perhaps too tutelary not to abandon us at the moment when we would have wanted to go beyond their horizon in their company (6).

These philosophical deities could take us only so far, and when we wanted to go farther they abandoned us to our own resources, or rather to “the irruption, into the general thematic, of the Absolute” (6). This irruption of a new element, the Absolute or the One without unity, to take the “step beyond” Being, not into emptiness, but into a “beyond filled by the Principle of minority” (6). The philosophy of Difference could give us only relative multiplicities, contained within the hypostases of Being, of the Idea, and of the State. Laruelle’s disappointment told him it was useless to

continue to work on it in order to get it to produce what it evidently is incapable of giving (6).

Laruelle considers that the promise of this philosophy has not been kept. What was this promise?

“the promise of breaking up Representation by elaborating a concept of becoming, of difference, of multiplicities beyond presence (7).

Far from breaking up Representation and taking the step beyond presence, and freeing the multiplicities from their relative limits, the philosophy of Difference was satisfied with

subordinating these multiplicities to the not so non-present essence of presence and simply refurbishing the old violence of reason (7).

Laruelle looks at the “new” philosophy of Difference and at the hopes that it inspired, and sees it to be “so disappointing, so violent, so voluntarist and activist, as if incapable of keeping its promise” (7). He concludes that it is not as new as it pretends: it contains the same old violence as the philosophy of Representation, the same false promises, the same enslavement of multiplicities. This “emotion” already contains within it the “step beyond”, as it involves not just disappointment and renunciation but acceptance:

Accepting the acknowledgement that this part of contemporary thought had been betrayed in the search for multiplicities by its excess of will and by the theoretical resources that it disposed of or that had disposed of it (7).

It seems that the very magnitude of our desire to go beyond the horizon of presence, and the very degree of our obsession were what held us back. We could not “break through” Representation by means of the resources provided by our tutelary figures nor by our own dedication and resolve. The Absolute is not won through to by active and wilful negation, but is attained more passively and patiently, by letting go, allowing oneself to be convinced, letting oneself be enchanted, not resisting:

Consenting at last to the One as to that which keeps the multiplicities beyond Being itself, as it keeps the minorities beyond the State (7).

Thus THE PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY (one could also translate this title as THE MINORITY PRINCIPLE, on the analogy with the pleasure-principle and the reality-principle) is a book which inaugurated a whole new phase in Laruelle’s philosophical practice. We are very lucky to have such a text as Laruelle is careful at the outset to specify the “emotion” that presided over the rupture not only with the philosophies of his contemporaries, but also with his own previous thought. The book came out in 1981, and the immediately preceding book, BEYOND THE POWER PRINCIPLE, was published 6 years before, in 1975. He came to call this new stage in his philosophical development “PHILOSOPHY II”. Measured in terms of his published books, his Philosophy II extended over a period of 14 years from THE PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY (1981) to the book that inaugurated a new phase (PHILOSOPHY III) in his thought, THEORY OF STRANGERS, published in 1995. The last book in his Philosophy II phase was THEORY OF IDENTITIES (1992).

The emotion described by Laruelle, what Deleuze would call a philosophical affect, is a composite of disappointment with the “contemporary problematic of Difference”, whose hopes he shared in what he will retroactively call his Philosophy I, and of being convinced, seized, enchanted and overwhelmed, by the “Absolute”. Laruelle combines both intellectual and affective predicates in the description of this emotion: conviction and enchantment, “breaking up Representation” and “irruption of the Absolute”, “born from ... the encounter of a disappointment and of an as yet unknown demand” (7).

We have seen that this quasi-religious language of the Absolute corresponds to a concept of “the One without Unity”. This concept comes from the conviction that the philosophy of Difference has come to a dead end, that it has given all that it is capable of giving, and that this is not enough. Multiplicities remain imprisoned in the philosophies of Difference, and so remain merely relative. This is what Laruelle “continuous multiplicities”, which he declares to be “identical to the modern concept of Difference” (6). He distinguishes this relative concept, the “contemporary, Grecocontemporary concept of multiplicities” (5), from the

dispersive, unary Multiplicities or Minorities, which are the absolute concept or the essence of multiplicities (6).

This absolute concept of multiplicities is born from an encounter, both intellectual and emotional. But also from a sort of “immediate experience”.

BADIOU, DELEUZE, LARUELLE AND THE MULTIPLE

“Deleuze’s fundamental problem is most certainly not to liberate the multiple but to submit thinking to a renewed concept of the One. We can therefore first state that one must carefully identify a metaphysics of the One in the work of Deleuze” (Badiou, DELEUZE, 11).

Badiou’s DELEUZE, THE CLAMOR OF BEING was published in French in 1997. He isolates what he calls a “metaphysics of the One” in Deleuze’s work, without referencing, and seemingly being unaware of, Laruelle’s critique of the philosophies of difference, begun in 1981 in his THE PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY. As we have seen, Laruelle advances a similar critique to that elaborated by Badiou, diagnosing a continued adhesion to a metaphysics of the One as being the source of Deleuze’s supposed failure to break through Representation.

Laruelle's solution is to produce a new concept of the One that is not bound by Badiou's opposition between "liberating the multiple" or "submitting to a renewed concept of the One". His solution is to propose and explore the consequences of a renewed concept of the One, a concept that would not be metaphysical, one elaborated with the explicit goal of liberating the multiple. In the preface to THE PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY Laruelle declares that this is goal is the driving intellectual and emotional force behind his concept of "the One without unity".

This concept of multiplicities without difference is reiterated and expounded more clearly in the next book that Laruelle published, A BIOGRAPHY OF THE ORDINARY MAN. This came out in 1985, and it is the second book in what Laruelle began to call his Philosophy II. It is a more systematic work than the PRINCIPLE OF MINORITY, and is written in the form of a "manual" containing a series of 140 concise "theorems", each accompanied by a more lengthy commentary. The first theorem is

There are two sources, two paths of minority experience and thought. Minorities as "difference", implanted on the body of the State and of Authorities in general. And minorities which are real beneath difference: individuals as such or without qualities, "ordinary men" whose concept is no longer that of difference and who precede the State.

It is important to note that after his DIFFERENCE AND REPETITION and LOGIC OF SENSE Deleuze too let drop the problematic of difference, to turn to developing a theory and practice of free multiplicities. Laruelle's concept of the One without unity is a far more adequate description of Deleuze's position than Badiou's reading of it as embodying a metaphysics of the One as opposed to a problematic of non-unitary multiplicities. Deleuze's LETTER TO A SEVERE CRITIC (1973) contains a very useful description, that is also an auto-critique, of the impasse that a representational philosophy of difference leads to, and of the consequent need to break with the mere representation of difference in favour of a performative enunciation and enactment of free multiplicities. In general, whenever Laruelle refers to Deleuze as entangled in the principle of philosophical sufficiency he has in mind the Deleuze of DIFFERENCE AND REPETITION, and simply ignores Deleuze's subsequent critique of his position. There is an uncanny "out of time" effect, that can be seen again in Laruelle's PHILOSOPHIES OF DIFFERENCE, published in 1986. Deleuze's passage from the system of difference to the practice of multiplicities thanks to his encounter with Guattari is simply passed over in silence. When Laruelle responds to Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of his work in their final collaboration WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?, published in 1991, he treats it as a book of the same type as DIFFERENCE AND REPETITION. However, WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY is not just a work by Deleuze, as Laruelle's response, "A Reply to Deleuze" seems to imply. It was written in collaboration with Guattari, a non-philosopher, who Deleuze explicitly honours for taking him outside philosophy. Laruelle gives a one-sided "philosophical" reading of the book and comes to the predictable conclusion that it is still philosophy, i.e. "philosophy" in his sense, which has next to nothing to do with Deleuze and Guattari's sense as expounded in the book Laruelle is purportedly replying to.

He does not rebut their critique of the scientism of his non-philosophy, nor to their argument that "non-philosophy" is not the invention of Laruelle, nor is it limited to his writings. Later, in 1995, in PRINCIPLES OF NON-PHILOSOPHY, Laruelle accepts this criticism, admitting that during his Philosophy II phase (from 1981 to 1995) he had been still under the sway of scientism, and more generally of the principle of sufficient philosophy.

These considerations show why Laruelle, despite his considerable merits, is systematically wrong when he assigns Deleuze to the realm of philosophical sufficiency ("representation", in Deleuze's terms). Despite his deep and intense non-philosophical voyage Laruelle is incapable of reading Deleuze and Guattari's WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? in terms of the relation with the outside, because he has not measured what the collaboration of Deleuze and Guattari brought to both of them.

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